

Zambia Social Science Journal

Volume 4

Number 1 *Volume 4, Number 1 (April 2013)*

Article 3

On Counting, Consumption, and Labour: Writing Histories of Central Africa

Robert Ross

University of Leiden

Iva Peša

University of Leiden

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj>



Part of the [African History Commons](#), and the [African Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ross, Robert and Peša, Iva (2013) "On Counting, Consumption, and Labour: Writing Histories of Central Africa," *Zambia Social Science Journal*: Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/vol4/iss1/3>

This Prefatory Matter is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Zambia Social Science Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. For more information, please contact jmp8@cornell.edu.

On Counting, Consumption, and Labour: Writing Histories of Central Africa

Robert Ross & Iva Peša
University of Leiden

This special issue of the *Zambia Social Science Journal* is the product of the fifth CART conference, held in Oegstgeest, the Netherlands, from 28-29 November 2013. Beginning in 2005, the research programme *From Muskets to Nokias: Technology, Consumption and Social Change in Central Africa from Pre-Colonial Times to the Present* (Leiden University and partners) has facilitated five Central African Research Themes (CART) conferences in the Netherlands and in Zambia. These conferences highlighted research being carried out by researchers associated with the programme, and provided a forum within which researchers could debate and discuss their findings and on-going research intentions. During the final conference in November 2013, the varied research endeavours of the programme were presented and an attempt was made to provide a preliminary synthesis of the programme's findings.

The final conference was entitled 'Muskets to Nokias: Towards a History of Consumption, Migration, and Power in Central Africa, 1500-1973'. Topics of the presented papers ranged from local vegetable market dynamics in Lusaka (Jessica Achberger), a history of Solwezi focusing on women, HIV-AIDS and faith (Felix Kaputu), the migration of women in Katanga (Donatien Dibwe), Mambwe labour migrants (Webby Kalikiti), Valentine Musakanya's career (Marja Hinfelaar), David Livingstone and Sekeletu (Walima Kalusa), Msiri and Bunkeya (Pierre Kalenga), weapons under Kaunda (Andy DeRoche), and Methodism in rural Katanga (Jeffrey Hoover), to witchcraft paraphernalia in the Livingstone Museum (Friday Mufuzi).

From this variety of papers, three have been reworked and are presented in this special issue: the first paper is on household budget research in Central Africa (Robert Ross), followed by a paper on the interrelationship between the Zambian and the Congolese Copperbelts (Enid Guene), and a paper on labour migration from Mwinilunga District (Iva Peša).

The research projects associated with the 'From Muskets to Nokias' programme aimed to offer a new reading of the history of the region through the lenses of technology and consumption, and their changing relations to social organisation. The programme's basic intellectual premise was that the introduction of industrial technology to the Copperbelts of Zambia and the Congo brought about a number of radical and interrelated socio-economic transformations, most of which were a direct consequence of the unprecedented levels of wealth creation, circulation, and consumption made possible by technological innovation itself. The programme argued that the analysis of the trajectories of industrial technology and consumption in Central Africa remained the exclusive preserve of colonial social anthropologists, for most of whom history was of little consequence, and of materialist historians, for whom the only historical process worth exploring was the structural opposition of labour and capital.

The previous CART conferences have given rise to a number of edited volumes. The first and most well known of these is *One Zambia, Many Histories*, which sought to shed light on the

varied post-colonial experiences of Zambia.¹ *Living the End of Empire*, dedicated to Andrew Roberts, focuses on the late colonial period and contains chapters on African nationalism, settlers, and colonial observers.² More recently, *The Objects of Life in Central Africa* has paid attention to varied patterns of consumption and social change in the broader Central African region, including Congo and Zimbabwe as well as Zambia.³ The current special issue, though not directly related to these earlier books, builds on this legacy.

The first contribution, by Robert Ross, deals with household budget research in colonial Central Africa. Questioning colonial methods of counting, it provides a historical counterpart to Morten Jerven's popular book *Poor Numbers*.⁴ Despite the objectivity of numbers, Ross argues that survey methods by colonial officials and social scientists alike were highly political and generally served to support colonial enterprises. Ross's contribution is an important call to question the numbers we find in the archives. Furthermore, this paper adds a different perspective to studies of the works of colonial officials and Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) scholars.

Enid Guene's paper on trade and labour migration in the Copperbelt region from 1910-1940 argues that the Zambian and the Congolese Copperbelts, despite their separate historiographies, have been highly interconnected ever since the discovery of large-scale copper deposits. Labour migration, trade, and politics tied the two cross-border areas together, even during the Great Depression, when it was difficult to find employment on the copper mines. Guene makes a strong point for a cross-border perspective and challenges the common nation-state view, so strongly represented in much of the historiography. Apart from engaging with Zambian and Congolese historiography, this paper adds to debates on borders and cross-border trade. Luckily, her call to take up cross-border studies of the Zambian and Congolese is now indeed being answered.⁵

Looking at the Copperbelt from a connected but geographically distant perspective, Iva Peša's paper looks at labour migration from Mwinilunga District in north-western Zambia, from 1930-1970. Peša argues that whereas previous studies have foregrounded the economic and political rationales for labour migration, we should pay equal attention to issues such as consumption, social relationships, and self-realisation. Far from being the outcome of push and pull factors, migrants shaped their own life trajectories, based on aspirations and decisions, which were not necessarily based on the market or the state. Labour migration from Mwinilunga District linked rural and urban areas and highlights the themes of consumption, migration, and power.

The research project 'From Muskets to Nokias' has merely highlighted some of the major and interesting research themes in Central African history. Many histories still remain to be written, but a modest start has been made to address alternative perspectives and to pay attention to the polyvalence of history. Future work, by young and promising Zambianist and Congolese scholars, might well address the economic history of Central Africa or pay attention to the social history of Copperbelt towns.

¹ J-B. Gewald, M. Hinfelaar, and G. Macola (eds.), *One Zambia, many histories: Towards a history of post-colonial Zambia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

² J-B. Gewald, M. Hinfelaar, and G. Macola (eds.), *Living the end of empire: Politics and society in late colonial Zambia* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

³ R. Ross, M. Hinfelaar, and I. Peša (eds.), *The objects of life in Central Africa: The history of consumption and social change, 1840-1980* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

⁴ M. Jerven, *Poor numbers: How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013).

⁵ See, for instance, M. Larmer and E. Kennes, 'Rethinking the Katangese secession', *The journal of imperial and commonwealth history* 42:2 (2014), 741-61.

References

- Gewald, J-B., M. Hinfelaar, & G. Macola (eds.). 2011. *Living the end of empire: Politics and society in late colonial Zambia*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gewald, J-B., M. Hinfelaar, & G. Macola (eds.). 2008. *One Zambia, many histories: Towards a history of post-colonial Zambia*. Leiden: Brill.
- Jerven, M. 2013. *Poor numbers: How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Larmer, M. & E. Kennes. 2014. 'Rethinking the Katangese secession'. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42, no. 2, 741-61.
- Ross, R., M. Hinfelaar, & I. Peša (eds.). 2013. *The objects of life in Central Africa: The history of consumption and social change, 1840-1980*. Leiden: Brill.